

Youth deserve a seat at COP26

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Body

Glasgow will host COP26 from Sunday until Nov. 12, where UN leaders and activists gather to determine their evolving response to the climate crisis. It's an unparalleled opportunity for climate action, and has resulted in victories and disappointment over its previous 25 iterations.

U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, playing host, hopes for a success, but COVID-19 has already wreaked havoc on logistics. Designed to attract 20,000 visitors last year, organizers delayed the summit, cancelled events and postponed meetings.

Greenpeace, along with 1,500 other groups, have ridiculed Johnson's government for vaccine requirements that disproportionately exclude representatives from the Global South. The chaos has left young voices unheard, and despite applause and awards for their activism, youth will have little representation on Glasgow's powerful floors.

The strategy undervalues the knowledge, innovation, and dedication of youth today. Though we weren't conscious when treaties were decided, we've grown educated on their contents. We have been active, disobedient and organized in our attempts to impact decisions that regularly block us out.

The massive uptake has turned "Climate Strikes" and "Fridays for Future" into common terms. We changed the language and intensity with which the crisis is discussed, and today's debates on climate finance and #BuildingBackBetter may not have arisen without youth work. Regardless of success, the progress of global action is inextricably tied to the actions of progressive youth.

This movement was largely organized by young leaders who compensate political inexperience with visibly genuine zeal. Their faces and stories encourage, if not loyalty, respect and imitation.

Just Google their names to see why governments have responded now after decades of inaction: Joshua Amponsah in Ghana, Licypriya Kangujam in India, Xiye Bastida in Mexico and New York and legions more. By boxing these young leaders out of Glasgow's deliberations, COP risks ignoring impactful ideas from a movement of which Greta Thunberg is just the tip of the melting iceberg.

Alok Sharma, the president of the COP26 summit, recently responded to criticism about representation. "Ensuring that the voices of those most affected by climate change are heard is a priority for the COP26 presidency," he announced, "and if we are to deliver for our planet, we need all countries and civil society to bring their ideas and ambition to Glasgow." It's a worthy goal; and one that youth are pursuing.

Throughout October, virtual summits gathered hundreds of young activists across Africa, Asia, and Latin America to deliberate on policy that addresses the climate crisis while uplifting youth populations. It builds on other conferences

Youth deserve a seat at COP26

like Milan's Youth4Climate summit. Their findings will be put to those in attendance on Nov. 5, COP's International Youth Day, at a global panel to discuss how the ideology of these young leaders can evolve into action.

Dominique Souris, recently named one of Canada's top 25 environmentalists, leads the organization with Youth Climate Lab and the Green Africa Youth Organization. Both teams are led and staffed by youth from across the globe, and is being funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre.

Panellists have experienced the climate crisis on its front line. They draw from developing nations that are already witnessing devastation caused by climate change. Hurricanes, famine and floods today devour their earnings while destroying their homes.

And the future is threatening. Youth have responded by demanding leaders address the climate crisis while improving living standards. They are calling for renewable energy, green jobs and climate finance that open up new opportunities to strengthen economic security while accelerating climate action.

But a global movement is nothing without connections to the levers of power. COP's real impact stems from connecting leaders with the activists who tirelessly sit down, march, and march again. For their partnership to succeed, events like that taking place on International Youth Day must make waves well beyond International Youth.

If COP's leaders hope to make a difference for the future, it will have to be informed, right now, by future leaders. The climate will not wait for them to age.

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Youth deserve a seat at COP26

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